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Marjie Lundstrom: Elk Grove students learn -- and teach -- a lesson in tolerance

By Marjie Lundstrom -- Bee Columnist - (*Published March 13, 2003*)

If only kids ran the country.

At the very least, the fifth-graders at Elliott Ranch Elementary School in Elk Grove could teach a thing or two to Congressman Howard Coble of North Carolina.

For starters: "We should not let wartime hysteria and racial prejudice lead us into another mistake," declares 10-year-old Stephen Fong.

Will someone please introduce this child to Congressman Coble?

First, though, a little background.

Four weeks ago, I waded into the uproar over Coble's insensitive comments about World War II internment -- words that were especially stinging to California Congressmen Robert Matsui and Mike Honda. These men know firsthand about the camps and their sorry place in American history.

Coble may be chastened by the backlash, but he's obviously clueless. This is the guy who followed up Trent Lott's epic blunder by publicly defending President Franklin D. Roosevelt's decision to send Japanese Americans to the camps.

Coble, the Republican chairman of the Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security, said that Roosevelt had to consider the nation's security.

"Some (Japanese Americans) probably were intent on doing harm to us," he said on the radio, "just as some of these Arab Americans are probably intent on doing harm to us."

Coble has since backpedaled, but the furor continues as some -- including the Democratic National Committee -- call for him to resign his subcommittee chairmanship.

Elliott Ranch fifth-grade teacher Shelly Hughes couldn't foresee the coast-to-coast uproar, but she did detect a precious teaching moment. Her class had just finished reading "Journey to Topaz," a historical novel about the internment. And students had just visited the Golden State Museum, where docents gave moving accounts of their lives in the camps.

So Hughes, joined by fellow fifth-grade teacher April Gonzalez, asked students to read the column, write down their thoughts and feelings -- then talk it over with a parent.

Their words are captivating.

If adults are destined to ignore history's lessons -- even the most painful -- take solace in the fact these children are not.

"Do you want that mean old Howard Coble to win?" asked 10-year-old Jason Sackett in a rousing essay. "Then put your back into it! We don't want history to repeat itself!"

Sana Sayedi, an 11-year-old Muslim girl, described her fears over the prospect, however remote, that her own father could be taken away.

"My family and I really love him and he loves us more than we love him," she wrote. "Just because my whole family is Muslim doesn't mean taking people's dad away is OK."

Her classmates empathize. The newly opened school has a diverse population, including Muslim and Asian American students. Hughes said many families have relocated from the Bay Area, creating its own set of readjustment issues.

"I have a really good friend that would be without a father, and I can tell you one thing, her dad is NOT a criminal," wrote 11-year-old Vanessa Waters.

Ian Gann, 10, thinks Coble "should take a minute and think if his father was going to be taken away.

"What would he feel like?" he asked.

Many students made personal connections to the isolation and persecution of internees.

Breanne Adams, 10, said she lived in Argentina for four years "so I know how it feels to be a foreigner. ... I think I stood out (due) to my appearance and the language I spoke."

Corrie Johnston, also 10, revealed: "I had a personal experience that relates to the people practicing the Muslim religion. Once I was blamed for throwing toilet paper on the ceiling in the girls' bathroom just because I was a girl.

"In my opinion, it is wrong and cruel to make the same mistake to the Muslim people," she said. "Do people really want to ruin our free country?"

In the end, Hughes was astonished how a simple assignment "just opened some door in their hearts and minds."

It also opened a window on our own future. Just ask 11-year-old Rachel Sumpter.

"I believe that kids like me can make a difference in the world," she wrote.

We're counting on it, Rachel. We're counting on it.

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